

Statement on the upcoming European Excellence Initiative

The Guild published its [original position](#) on the idea of a European Excellence Initiative in 2019. In this position paper we argued that universities as drivers for the knowledge economy are integral to Europe's contributions to addressing the societal and scientific challenges of our time. Therefore, it is critical that the EU takes decisive steps to ensure that academic institutions in Europe retain their position amongst the best in the world. Since 2021, Horizon Europe has seen initial pilot calls to develop a European Excellence Initiative (EEI), and an EEI has been identified as a key tool for implementing the EU's strategy for universities and for helping universities develop in line with the goals of the European Research Area (ERA).

Investing in the global competitiveness of university research has never been more important. The Guild reiterates its support for an EEI that will genuinely focus on scientific excellence through an open competition and activities that bring European added value. Therefore, the EEI should be developed as an important action to implement the ERA priority area of pursuing Europe's scientific leadership, as described in the ERA Pact for R&I. It is important that the EEI is clear in its scope and principles, and focuses on areas that will ensure Europe's publicly funded universities to compete in research and innovation with the world's best universities in the world in research and innovation.

When it comes to the European university alliances, The Guild recommends that their researchers would be welcomed to compete transparently in the competitive calls of Horizon Europe without an earmarked action that is either exclusively or primarily dedicated to them. It is essential that the competitive and excellence-based selection processes rewarding the highest scientific quality can continue to be guaranteed in Horizon Europe and in its successor programme. Building on our detailed position established in 2019, we present the following recommendations in light of the evolving discussion on a full-scale EEI:

1. Reward and empower scientific excellence at the level of research teams

What is missing in the current R&I funding landscape of the EU is funding for fostering strategic cooperation among the best research teams in Europe that focus their work on longer-term research projects. Such funding would be needed to ensure Europe's scientific leadership in areas that require collaboration within and across disciplines, to address challenges like artificial intelligence or climate change. This kind of funding should be the main focus of the EEI, and it should foster bottom-up approaches, to empower cutting-edge research teams to strengthen Europe's global leadership in science. These projects would be selected based on a highly competitive process focusing on scientific excellence.

2. Provide support for capacity-building to strengthen conditions for research excellence

The Guild supports the objective of the EEI to fund capacity-building of universities and university cooperations, including the European University alliances. Universities have a unique role in creating optimal environments for cutting-edge research and innovation. A separate funding strand could

provide opportunities for universities to strengthen their institutional capacities in areas such as Open Science, digitalisation, doctoral education, interdisciplinarity or innovation, responding to their institutional and strategic needs. For the capacity-building to be as effective as possible, it is important to allow enough flexibility for the participating universities to decide on the areas they want to develop and to articulate the European added value of their projects.

3. Use the EEI to boost research excellence in Widening countries

The EEI has real potential to enable countries with less advanced R&I systems to upgrade their capacities. The Guild recommends that the EEI should have a strand supporting universities in the Widening countries to further strengthen their capacities to succeed in winning competitive excellence-based funding. In other words, the EEI should facilitate the translation of institutional success in local and national research funding to success in excellence-based funding at EU level through Horizon Europe.